

Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel to the Knesset in Jerusalem

on 18 March 2008

(Translation to English from German from the Bundesregierung website*)

Mr President,
Madam Speaker,
Prime Minister,
Madam President of the Supreme Court,
Honourable Members of the Knesset,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Madam Speaker, anni modda lachem she-nittan li le-dabber ellechem kaan be-bait mechubad se. Se kawwod gadol awurri. [Thank you for allowing me to speak to you here in the Knesset. I am very honoured to be here.]

I would like to thank all Members of the Knesset for this honour. Thank you, too, for allowing me to speak to you today in my mother tongue. This year in which I speak to you is a special one. For in this year, 2008, you celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of your state, the State of Israel.

60 years of Israel – 60 years of magnificent work by people struggling to build a nation under difficult circumstances.

60 years of Israel – 60 challenging years of countering threats and fighting for peace and security.

60 years of Israel – 60 years of integrating immigrants into the body politic of this land.

60 years of Israel – and we have a country bursting with vitality and confidence, capable of great technological feats, with a wealth of culture and traditions.

60 years of Israel – this is most of all an occasion for great joy. On behalf of the Federal Government and the German people, I congratulate all citizens of Israel on this special jubilee.

Ladies and gentlemen, Germany and Israel are and will always remain linked in a special way by the memory of the Shoah. For this very reason, we began the first German-Israeli intergovernmental consultations yesterday with a commemoration

ceremony in Yad Vashem.

The mass murder of 6 million Jews, carried out in the name of Germany, has brought indescribable suffering to the Jewish people, Europe and the entire world. The Shoah fills us Germans with shame. I bow my head before the victims. I bow before the survivors and before all those who helped them so they could survive.

The break with civilization that was the Shoah has no parallel. It left wounds that have not healed to this day. Initially, it seemed to make relations between Israel and Germany downright impossible. Israeli passports long contained the words: "Valid for all countries except Germany".

I myself spent the first 35 years of my life in the German Democratic Republic, a part of Germany where National Socialism was considered a West German problem. But the GDR did not recognize the State of Israel until shortly before its own demise. It took more than 40 years before Germany as a whole acknowledged and embraced both its historical responsibility and the State of Israel.

Ladies and gentlemen, I most firmly believe that only if Germany accepts its enduring responsibility for *the* moral disaster in its history will we be able to build a humane future. Or, to put it another way, respect for our common humanity is rooted in our responsibility for the past.

We often say that Germany and Israel are linked by a special, unique relationship. But what precisely is meant by this "unique relationship"? Is my country aware of the import of these words – not just when repeated in speeches and at ceremonial events, but also when deeds are called for?

How, for example, do we react when the atrocities of the Nazis are played down? There can only be one response. Every attempt to trivialize these atrocities must be nipped in the bud. Anti-Semitism, racism and xenophobia must never be allowed to gain a foothold in Germany or Europe again, because otherwise all of us – German society as a whole, the European community, the democratic foundations of our countries – would be placed in jeopardy.

Or how do we react when surveys show that a clear majority of European respondents say that Israel is a bigger threat to the world than Iran? Do we politicians in Europe fearfully bow to public opinion and flinch from imposing further stricter sanctions on Iran to persuade it to halt its nuclear programme?

No, however unpopular we may make ourselves, that is precisely what we cannot afford to do. For if we were to take that route, we would neither have understood our historical responsibility nor developed an awareness for the challenges of our time. Either of these failings would be fatal.

It would be just as fatal to ignore the question of how to keep the memory of the Shoah alive when all those who experienced it first-hand have passed away. It is true that places of remembrance are important, places such as the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin or Yad Vashem. They keep memories alive. But it is also true that places alone are not enough once memories become part of the past. Memories must constantly be recalled. Thoughts must become words, and words deeds.

David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of your country, and Konrad Adenauer, the first Federal Chancellor of mine, embodied precisely this approach. That is why it was so important to me to go to the Sde Boker kibbutz on Sunday and lay a wreath on Ben Gurion's grave. For it was Ben Gurion and Adenauer who turned thoughts into words, and words into deeds. With prudence and foresight they laid the foundations on which the relations between our countries now rest.

Today it is up to us, to my generation, to campaign together with the young generation for a culture of remembrance – a culture of remembrance that will also endure when the survivors of the Shoah are no longer among us. Of course there is no easy way of doing this. But recognizing and taking on the challenge is the first crucial step towards developing common creative strategies for a future culture of remembrance, in cooperation with our young people in Israel and Germany.

We can be strengthened in this endeavour by something that has also aided us in past decades – the power of trust. This trust has its origins in the values that we, Germany and Israel, both share, the values of freedom, democracy and respect for human dignity. This is the most precious asset we have – the inalienable and indivisible dignity of each individual human being, irrespective of their gender, descent, language, beliefs, origin or homeland.

Ladies and gentlemen, our sense of historical responsibility and commitment to our shared values have formed the basis of German-Israeli relations from the outset and until the present day. All of us, Germans and Israelis alike, and indeed all the peoples of this world, are living through a period of dramatic change. The global order is being cast anew. States, economies and societies are becoming interconnected as never before. Many people are afraid of this transformation.

They can feel for themselves that the co-existence of nations, religions and civilizations has become an all-important issue of the present day. Only a hair's breadth separates great opportunities from significant risks. This is globalization.

It is my firm conviction that given these groundbreaking global changes, we need to look beyond national boundaries to create a global, shared awareness of the key challenges facing our world – such as ensuring that prosperity is fairly distributed, protecting our climate, fighting the new threats posed by terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. But this awareness is needed not only in order to identify and recognize the challenges. We also need it if we are to master these challenges. In many areas this can now scarcely be done alone. They can only be mastered by states acting in concert – states that are partners linked by shared values and interests.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that Israel and Germany, Israel and Europe are such partners – linked by shared values, linked by shared challenges and linked by shared interests. For stability, economic prosperity, security and peace, both in Europe and in this region, are in our mutual interest.

It was precisely with this in mind that we held the first German-Israeli intergovernmental consultations, thus opening a new chapter in the relations between our two countries. It was precisely with this in mind that we adopted a whole host of projects pertaining to foreign and defence policy, the economic sphere, youth exchange, cooperation in the fields of justice and environmental protection and, not least, science and research.

It is no exaggeration to say that relations between our two countries are excellent. But we want to strengthen these ties and the trust between our peoples even further. We want to consolidate our partnership even further.

In the field of youth work, for example, we have established a joint Israeli-German Future Forum which will bring young Germans and Israelis from the worlds of business, academia and culture even closer together.

In the scientific field, for example, we are about to launch the German-Israeli Year of Science and Technology.

In the field of economic relations, for example, we want in particular to encourage companies in both countries to make even greater use than hitherto of the potential offered by the sectors of the future.

And in the field of environmental and climate protection, for example, the high-tech country Israel can share its extensive know-how, especially in the fields of water and irrigation. And we want to develop a new form of trilateral cooperation between Germany, Israel and Africa.

Ladies and gentlemen, we discussed all of these and other future projects and plans yesterday. However, none of them will be carried out in a vacuum. For while we were holding our talks, the threat to Israel continued. While we speak here today, thousands of people are living in fear and dread of missile attacks and acts of terror by Hamas. Let me state unequivocally that the Qassam attacks carried out by Hamas must stop. Acts of terror are a crime. They do nothing to resolve this conflict which overshadows the region and the day-to-day lives of people in Israel and the lives of people in the Palestinian territories.

I have stated repeatedly and say here again today that Germany is a staunch advocate of the vision of two states in secure borders and in peace, for the Jewish people in Israel and for the Palestinians in Palestine. We therefore strongly support all efforts following the Annapolis Conference – especially those of the American Administration – which can help realize this vision and bring peace to the region.

I am well aware that you do not need any unsolicited advice from outsiders and you most definitely do not need anyone talking down to you. Ultimately, a solution can only be worked out by Israelis and Palestinians themselves. However, I would like to expressly offer you and your negotiation partners on the Palestinian side, above all President Abbas, the support of the international community. For we know that compromises acceptable to all sides will have to be made if the two-state vision is to be realized. This will also require the strength to make painful concessions.

We know that the success of this difficult process is not only in the interest of this region but in the interest of us all. For instability here will not be without consequences for us in Germany and Europe. For instance, the situation in Lebanon in particular is another source of great uncertainty. Germany supports the endeavours of the Arab League to resolve the crisis there. But that will only be possible if Syria, too, finally recognizes Lebanon's legitimate government and makes a constructive contribution towards settling that crisis. I want to take this opportunity to urge Syria to do so.

Ladies and gentlemen, the threats directed against Israel and the Jewish people by the Iranian President are without doubt a particular cause for concern. His

repeated vilifications and Iran's nuclear programme are a danger to peace and security. If Iran ever acquires nuclear weapons, the consequences will be disastrous – first and foremost for the security and existence of Israel, secondly for the entire region and ultimately, far beyond that, for all of us in Europe and the world, for all who cherish the values of freedom, democracy and human dignity. This must be prevented.

One thing must be clear here – I said this before the United Nations last September and I want to repeat it here today: The world does not have to prove to Iran that Iran is building a nuclear bomb. Iran has to convince the world that it is not striving towards such a bomb.

Here of all places I want to explicitly stress that every German Government and every German Chancellor before me has shouldered Germany's special historical responsibility for Israel's security. This historical responsibility is part of my country's *raison d'être*. For me as German Chancellor, therefore, Israel's security will never be open to negotiation. And that being the case, we must do more than pay lip-service to this commitment at this critical point. Together with its partners, Germany is setting its sights on a diplomatic solution. But if Iran does not come around, the German government will remain fully committed to sanctions.

The latest UN Security Council Resolution, adopted just a few days ago, once again demonstrates the international community's determination and unity of purpose. The international community will, indeed must, remain faithful to this approach. I will also continue to call for the European Union to take a clear stance. I believe it is important that Israel has close ties with the European Union via the EU's cooperation with the Mediterranean region and the European Neighbourhood Policy. We can and will further intensify these ties.

As I have already said, Israel and Europe are linked by shared values, challenges and interests. I thus firmly back Israel's desire for even closer links with the European Union. They would benefit both sides. They would provide a host of new opportunities.

Madam Speaker, ladies and gentlemen, in the course of their continent's history, Europeans have discovered that peace is possible even after centuries of violent conflict and strife. Through the miracle of the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, we Germans in particular have experienced first-hand that even after decades, when many have given up all hope, profound political change can come about.

I could not stand before you today and I could not speak to you today as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, as someone who grew up in the GDR, if there had not been politicians of the calibre of Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt and Helmut Kohl in the Federal Republic after the Second World War. They believed in the power of freedom, the power of democracy and the power of human dignity. They succeeded in making the seemingly impossible possible: Germany's unification in peace and freedom, which paved the way for reconciliation throughout Europe to become a reality.

Having seen the impossible become possible, we can have an unshakeable faith and confidence that any effort whatsoever is worthwhile which brings the nations of the Middle East a real step closer to living together in peace. Or as David Ben Gurion said: Anyone who does not believe in miracles is not a realist. Today when we look back on German-Israeli relations, on the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, we know that his words have proven to be just as realistic as they are true.

Yes, our relations are special, indeed unique, – marked by enduring responsibility for the past, shared values, mutual trust, abiding solidarity for one another and shared confidence. In this spirit, we are celebrating today's anniversary. In this spirit, Germany will never forsake Israel but will remain a true friend and partner.

Masal-tov le-chaggigot shishim shanna le-medinnat Issrael. Shalom
[Congratulations on the State of Israel's 60th anniversary. Shalom.]

* http://www.bundesregierung.de/nn_6566/Content/EN/Reden/2008/03/2008-03-18-rede-knesset.html